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ABSTRACT

Young people must prepare themselves for lifelong learning and frequent job changes. Optimists predict a new world of work with many creative, interesting, satisfying jobs; pessimists believe society will finally run out of work and foresee unemployment and social downgrading for a majority of people. There are indications at present of both scenarios. What seems certain is that only highly qualified and flexible workers will be eligible for the new economy. Even the service sector, which many hoped would provide more jobs, is downsizing its workforce. The character and organization of work is changing. By as early as the end of this decade, four-fifths of all work will rely on information. Rediscovery of the human factor, the debate on new management concepts with flatter hierarchies, more openness, self-responsibility, and participation are dictated by new economic realities in which the evolution in information technology plays the key role. Networks will define the working society of the future. Electronically-linked freelance providers can work in flexible networks to produce and sell goods and services. When a commission has been completed after a day, month, or year, the network dissolves itself. Sociologists and economists are thinking about a "third sector" outside of paid labor in which honorary or civic work, barter groups, charitable services, neighborliness, and the 'grey' economy all play a part. Questions about how (or whether) civic work should be paid, who should do it, and whether people on social assistance and the jobless can be obliged to participate show that much about this new approach is still unclear. (YLB)

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The future of work

Insights, views, prospects

by

Michael Bechtel

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Summary

The 'old economy' was mainly about having a job for life with the same employer. Now, unemployment and premature retirement is for many people part of working life. Young people must prepare themselves for lifelong learning and frequent job changes. Optimists predict for them a new world of work with many creative, interesting and satisfying jobs. Pessimists believe society will finally run out of work. They foresee unemployment and social downgrading for a majority of people and corresponding social conflicts. There are indications at present of both scenarios. But what seems certain is that only highly-qualified and flexible workers will be eligible for the 'new economy'. Even in the service sector, which many hoped would provide more jobs, workforces are being downsized. Sociologists and economists are thinking about a 'third sector' in which honorary or civic work plays the main role. But questions about how civic work can be paid sensibly, who should do it, and whether people on social assistance and the jobless can be obliged to, shows that much about this new approach is still unclear. Meanwhile, globalisation is advancing. Social standards are dropping to resemble each other at a lower level worldwide. Networks of activity span the globe. National states are losing more and more influence on their own economies. Opportunities for designing social structures are narrowing. It appears that whoever wants to keep pace with globalisation cannot insist upon socially and legally secure jobs. But the role of the individual is becoming more important. Thanks to information technology, people working in the new sectors can overcome many limitations and hierarchies stemming from the old industrial production era. People's desire to determine their own lives is moving up to a top place in their scale of values. The working world of tomorrow will be defined by a generation that wants to "perform not (only) for money, but for a purpose".

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On his 89th birthday, Werner Lowinski can look back at a full and active working life. For more than 50 years he worked as a fitter at a steelworks. He shows with pride the certificate of service and gold watch the management gave him when he retired. His son Peter has no certificate to show. At 64, he's already a pensioner, but not a voluntary one. The steel plant in the Ruhr area, at which, like his father, he began work as a fitter, was shut down in the mid-1980s. Peter was then 45 and still had luck. His retraining in numerically controlled machine programming secured him a job in a medium-sized high-tech company. But when he turned 59 his boss told him he had worked long enough and a younger man should have his job. Peter accepted that. He got a redundancy settlement and 'bridging' pay and took early retirement – and that was that. His son Kevin, in his mid-30s, has travelled from Munich for Granddad's birthday. He didn't want to follow family tradition and be a fitter. After taking his A-levels he completed an apprenticeship as an electrician to ensure a solid trade foundation, specialised in data processing technology, and then passed the examination for a master craftsman's diploma. The company for which he works as a service technician is already his third employer. But Kevin is about to find another. He says that being continually on the move - today in the USA, tomorrow in Thuringia, eastern Germany, and the day after tomorrow in South Korea – gets on his nerves. Besides that, he believes his company's business situation is not very stable. The competition is tough, and he doesn't want to wait until his job has gone. That's why he and a colleague are working on a concept for their own small company. He reckons his know-how must be marketable.

The three generations of the Lowinskis are a skilled worker family of the day before yesterday, yesterday and today. The grandfather spent his entire working life with one company, the father experienced unemployment and premature retirement, and the son is geared to lifelong learning and frequent job changes. How will it go with Werner Lowinski's great-grandson?

Euphoria and prophecies of doom

Whoever reads German business magazine predictions of the impacts on work of the transition to the information society can gain the impression that rosy times are ahead. There will be a great number of new jobs, they say. Work will be more creative, richer in content, more interesting and allow more time off. People will sit at

home at their networked PCs and log into the value-added process of their companies in their own time and on their own responsibility. The journey to work will run via the data highway. The time-consuming, expensive and ecologically questionable drive there will be a thing of the past. Critics of post-modern society dismiss those promises. They predict that before long society will finally run out of work. Unemployment, social downgrading for a majority of the people and corresponding social conflicts will be unavoidable unless they can be countered by new instruments.

In the realities of the present time there are indications of both scenarios. Ludwig Schubert, an economist at the European Commission, says an estimated 30 million EU citizens are currently looking for work. 'Only' 18 million of them are registered as unemployed. In Germany, despite a slight improvement, unemployment is at its highest since the end of the Second World War and the global depression of the 1930s. About seven million people are jobless, if the unregistered unemployed and those in government retraining schemes are counted. They cost public coffers and social security funds about DM 160 billion per year – money that is missing for productive investment. Labour market researcher Wolfgang Klauder calculates further that if the workplaces supported by government subsidies are deducted, about 10 million normal, competitive jobs are lacking.

There is no dispute that this situation is the result of far-reaching structural change. But haven't we had that before? In earlier days, most people worked on the land. In Germany today, farm workers account for slightly less than 3 per cent of the national workforce. The agricultural sector was 'downsized'. And industry is now doing exactly the same thing in shedding its labour force. Experts estimate that the proportion of industrial production workers in the EU will drop from a current 35 per cent to 15 per cent of the total workforce. This structural change must be promoted, some say, because then the problems will disappear.

But others say it is not that simple. Employment is declining inevitably because rapid technological progress is making more workers redundant than new ones are needed. Not so long ago economists and politicians hoped that the redundant would find new jobs in the service sector. But automation has begun there. Banks and insurance companies and the wholesale and retail trades are restructuring too.

Traditional hierarchical pyramids and whole armies of employees are being replaced by small, professional teams that work with state-of-the-art software and information and communications technologies.

So some economists and politicians are pinning their hopes of new jobs on the data highway and cyberspace. They are there all right, but they are not enough to absorb the millions of white- and blue-collar workers who have been displaced by new technologies. And they provide jobs for the elite: for engineers, highly-specialised technicians, software programmers, scientists, trainers and experts. The IT branch is seeking them desperately – a skills shortage is going hand-in-hand with mass unemployment.

The end of the working society?

Sociologist Hannah Arendt prophesied the end of the working society back in 1960. Her theory has in the meantime become a conventional wisdom among many sociologists and journalists. "We must finally face the facts: there will be no return to full employment," wrote German sociologist Ulrich Beck in 1997 in the Hamburg-based weekly newspaper Die Zeit. In 1998, he wrote in the Süddeutsche Zeitung, of Munich: "Whoever promises to have a cure for unemployment is lying." Patrick Liedtke, co-author of the Club of Rome's latest report on the job market, shares that view. He says: "We will have to live with the fact that the volume of paid employment will fall." And the report of the Bavarian and Saxony state governments' Commission on the Future points out in its first sentence the "declining significance of paid labour in the value-added process".

This is proven by the drop in the number of hours worked and the growth of casual jobs. At the beginning of the 1970s, there was one such job to five permanent jobs secured by labour law. Today, the ratio is 1:2, and in 15 years it could be 1:1. Beck says this means that fulltime jobs will be replaced by sub-employment that is flexible in terms of space, time and labour contracts – with at the same time a trend to lower living standards. It is precisely the US economy, hailed as a 'job machine', that delivers proof of this trend. And industrial companies are only just beginning the transition to 'digital capitalism'. Developments such as e-commerce, the banks'

thinning-out of their branches, and doing away with customary company secretariats are in their infancy.

But the development of technology, particularly IT, results not only in a direct loss of jobs. Because it also paves the way for globalisation, it causes a restructuring and redistribution of the work still available.

Globalisation means more than expansion of world trade. Entire production factors are changing. The value-added chain is broken open and production scattered across the world. Globally operating companies are constantly searching for the most favorable production location. The American company Gillette, for example, achieves 70 per cent of its sales outside the USA. It manufactures hundreds of products in thousands of versions in about 60 factories around the world, including in Germany. All production processes are standardised, meaning production can be switched rapidly from one location to another. "Every day," says Edward F. DeGraan named acting Chief Executive Officer, "we try to find out where we can best manufacture Product A for sale on Market B." The Gillette Head Office keeps a constant eye on exchange rates, pay increases and law amendments that make production more expensive in any location.

Robert Reich, the US Labour Secretary, said that soon there would be no more national products and technologies and no more national companies and industries. And certainly not national sentimentality. Marcus Bierich, chairman of the supervisory board of the Stuttgart-based Bosch company, said the dilemma was that "entrepreneurs are getting increasingly into a conflict of loyalties between their international customers and their national workers, trade unions and governments". Many entrepreneurs resolve that conflict by cutting domestic costs, importing input stock cheaply from abroad and switching their production to other countries.

Companies based in a social market economy with expensive social security cover against sickness or unemployment (German employers, for example, pay half their employees' contributions) soon will not be able to hold their own. The worldwide networking of the markets is generating a merciless competition and downward pressure on work and pay. The interweaving of national economies is already so far advanced that every country is competing against almost every other. The German

news magazine Der Spiegel quoted Daniel Jones, motor vehicle market expert and professor at Cardiff Business School, as saying: "It's business war." The US magazine Newsweek said "killer capitalism" was making a triumphant advance around the world.

Employees' pay is levelling off worldwide. That is not making the poor rich, and the formerly well-off workers in the industrialised nations are becoming poorer, if they can at all keep their jobs. Der Spiegel also quoted Harvard's Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter warning her students: "Be aware that no job is secure anymore. Peopled located somewhere in the world take decisions that can turn the whole job market upside down. Someone, somewhere in the world can kill your jobs."

A levelling downwards is underway. The division of the world into three parts - industrialised nations, threshold countries and the Third World - soon will no longer be right. Volker Heins, of the Institute for Social Research, Frankfurt am Main, says: "Under the pressure of globalisation, it is precisely the classic, democratically constituted industrialised nations that are becoming the real developing countries, in which there are no longer any stable structures." Lester C. Thurow, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), predicts that "in most national economies a class will emerge which Karl Marx described as the lumpenproletariat". And German political scientist Wolf-Dieter Narr warns: "Sooner or later there will also be slums in Germany."

Companies are changing their faces

Not only the era of the paid labour society of fulltime work is probably nearing its end. The character and organisation of work is changing as well. If the predictions are to be believed, four-fifths of all work will turn on information by as early as the end of this decade. Advising, informing, researching, developing, organising, networking, managing, investigating, designing and, not least, entertaining, are typical forms of future work. That has impacts.

Most people today work in functional hierarchies in the form in which they came into being in the industrial society under the pressure to produce ever more goods for ever greater profit. Highly-compartmentalised division of labour and great

administrative input characterise organisations in which the tasks and scope for taking decisions of industrial workers and low-level clerical staff are aimed at being as simple as possible. More complex decisions are reserved for the managers as trustees of centralised knowledge. Bosses derive their authority from the information available only to them.

That system no longer functions. To be successful in a dynamic world, companies must make their know-how accessible to employees at all levels. Only so can all involved act quickly, efficiently and creatively. The more people are trained the less they need to be told what to do and the more they can cope imaginatively with unforeseeable events. Above all, management must in future boost their employees' motivation and level of training so that they do not merely do what they are told, but also what managers cannot (yet) tell them to do.

So the rediscovery of the human factor, the debate on new management concepts with flatter hierarchies, more openness, self-responsibility and participation is no coincidence. It is dictated by new economic realities in which the evolution in IT plays the key role. It was first the penetration of the PC in the 1980s, then companies' in-house networking by client-server architectures, and finally the embedding of their internal information systems in a public information structure that created a globally uniform information platform, the Internet. It is the essential precondition for asserting 'systematic production methods' and changing worldwide production structures.

Companies can now operate with a fine mesh of central control and decentralised responsibility on a world scale, 'as if from one mould'. In a world-spanning information area, such globalisation of production can give rise to corresponding control levels. That in turn advances globalisation – on the one hand by improved steering of the production process, and on the other by being able to combine production factors at every location, and in real time, via the information system. Thus, development teams work together on a project although their members are spread around the world. 'Virtual companies' can be present in a country although they have only set up business and service functions close to their customers while all their other departments are located in other parts of the world.

Networks define the working society of the future

Obviously, these developments favour new forms of the use of labour, such as 'contingent working'. That means the variable and completely flexible use of labour that is becoming a principle of personnel management. The workforce structure of some companies is already similar to three concentric rings. In the centre are the full- or part-time employees. They are ringed by temporary workers provided by agencies and the 'new self-employed'. The outer ring consists of the employees of service providers who handle tasks outsourced by the companies.

The demarcation lines of company operations are blurring. They are now formed by the temporary interplay of different units that IT enables. These units often are independent companies or former company departments that have been converted into stand-alone profit centres. Theoretically, the 'fine tuning' can go so far that every employee is integrated in the production process as an 'autonomous' unit. In an ideal case, a major company breaks itself down into as many single companies as the number of people it employs.

While the world watches with interest the mega-mergers of the big banking, insurance, motor vehicle or pharmaceuticals corporations, MIT researchers have thought the process through to its end. Thomas W. Malone and his colleagues say that temporary companies, formed ad hoc by freelancers and micro-firms, could become the dominant business structure. Electronically networked, they could take over development, production, marketing and sales tasks which earlier were handled by permanent companies. Malone calls the new business system the 'e-lance economy', and says it will make its debut in the next few decades.

This system's core is not the capitalist society, but the individual. Tasks are handled by independent freelance providers rather than by groups of managers cooperating closely together. These electronically-linked 'e-lancers' combine in flexible networks to produce and sell goods and services. When a commission has been completed after one day, one month or a year, the network dissolves itself. As independent actors, its members go looking for other assignments.

This is not a fictitious, hypothetical model. The e-lance business exists, and in many forms. Its emergence is due to the Internet. It is visible in the number of virtual companies, in the growing role of outsourcing and electronic data transfer, and in the increasing number of freelancers and temporary workers. Ad hoc project teams are also becoming more important in big companies, which are hiving off divisions as independent firms. Only 25 years ago, every fifth worker in the USA was employed by one of the top 500 companies. Today, the figure is not even every tenth. True, the big corporations control ever greater flows of money, but, says Malone, they are controlling daily business less and less. They can be described as "growing hollow bodies".

That is due to the fact that because information is now available anytime and anywhere, the value of central administration and decision-making is declining. Individuals can manage themselves and consult and harmonise with others by electronic means. Networks enable the new micro-firms to tap global reservoirs for information, expertise and financing, which earlier were reserved for major companies. That gives small companies the advantages of the big ones without losing leanness, flexibility and creativity.

Accumulation of property is no longer a goal

Malone says it is conceivable that networks will define the working world of the 21st century similarly to the way industrial organisation characterised it in the 20th century. The typical company will then consist of up to 10 employees, and offices and transport will largely be replaced by telecommunications. A functionally equipped flat or a hotel room with telecoms facilities will be enough. The accumulation of property in the form of machinery, real estate and inventory is no longer a goal. This is totally in the sense of Jeremy Rifkin's view: why should one buy machinery, buildings and vehicles when leasing enables access to them? The wealth of these companies consists of intellectual capital and the creativity and imaginativeness of their people.

Social security systems are running dry

The customary terms of 'company' and 'employee' are becoming ever less apt. William Bridges, whom the Wall Street Journal cites as one of the most influential

advisors of the US economy, predicted in his book 'Job Shift' the gradual end of conventional company structures. "The modern world is facing an enormous upheaval, a tremendous leap in creativity and productivity. But the job, the socially and legally secured workplace, will no longer be part of this new economic reality. True, there will even then be an immense amount of work, but it will no longer be neatly divided up and packaged as boxes listed on company organisational charts." Systems that regulate working life and social security based on the model of open-ended fulltime employment are threatening to run dry.

Bridges notes laconically: "The struggle to preserve steady jobs is as pointless as the battle for a deckchair on the Titanic." The British newspaper The Independent commented similarly: "We are all dependent on jobs. But in historical terms this dependency is very new. Now the global market is changing work, and we must say goodbye to the habits of the job system ... we shall soon notice that jobs are not part of the natural environment like trees or water."

To be sure, not all jobs, not all fixed working relationships, will disappear. But fundamentally different types of work will exist alongside each other. The Hamburg-based trend researcher Matthias Horx differentiates between 'old work' and 'new work'. The old work of guaranteed pay, fixed job profiles, foreseeable routine processes and interchangeable job-holders will continue to exist, but will probably be paid much less than at present. In the new work·sector, thanks to IT, workers will be able to overcome the many restrictions of industrial production conditions. People's interest is determining their own lives is moving to the top of their scale of values. The working world of tomorrow, Horx adds, will be characterised by a generation that wish to "perform not (only) for money, but for a purpose". Companies which offer that option will attract the best employees.

This development has two sides. It is true that the new forms of working offer a great degree of self-initiative – some would call it self-exploitation – linked with many individual freedoms. But dynamic, highly-qualified and young people are above all suited to that. Whoever cannot cope with the pace and rapidly changing demands will quickly drop out of the loop. He or she will end up with the 'working poor', such as those in the USA, which account for the downside of the country's 'job miracle'.

Is the traditional job market policy any good?

Many experts still believe the view of a two-thirds society is an optimistic assumption. In the transition to the information society, long-discernible trends to social polarisation and segmentation are strengthening. People who work outside the information level will have markedly poorer chances of access to well-paid jobs. Long-term unemployment and other forms of social exclusion are creating at the lower end of society a segment of people who are pushed permanently to its margins. The chances of them re-entering the mainstream worsen the more the productivity potential of the new economy begins to take hold.

Above this segment a group of people are developing that, although qualified, eke out a miserable existence as casual, temporary or part-time workers. They have work, but they find it ever more difficult to live from it.

In Germany, there is no lack of demands and attempts to restore full employment with traditional instruments – by further deregulation or cooperative mechanisms such as the Alliance for Work formed by the Federal government, employers and trade unions. This is where the supporters of demand and supply side economic policy feud most vehemently.

The dispute focuses on, among other things, the length of 'normal working hours'. Peter Grottian, professor of political science in Berlin, supports the trade unions' traditional position. He says: "Because of progress in productivity, distribution of working hours is possible only if the normal working day is reduced further." The average annual working hours in Germany dropped between 1950 and 1994 from almost 2,300 to 1,600. Grottian says the willingness of society to adjust to increasing productivity and the emancipation of women is a decisive factor in employment - plus the power of the workers to assert that preparedness. Grottian, who sets a good example as the holder of a half-day university chair, also believes that a new type of flexible, 30-hour working week is likely for two-thirds of the future workforce.

In addition, he puts his faith in demand stimulated by public spending, another customary 'left-wing' way of thinking. He says high growth of services for private persons could create jobs in the caring, leisure and child-upbringing sectors. But if

these services are to be provided privately, the work must be paid at a low rate. And that will threaten a split in society between domestic servants and those who can afford them. Grottian says he regrets that stimulating public demand is now regarded as utopian. Falling government budgets and the difficulty of being able to offer millions of jobs without restructuring the 'tax state' and public institutions was resulting in people writing resignedly about "the end of work". That created a climate of acceptance for the increasing, but by no means inevitable, injustice and exclusion in society.

The champions of state intervention argue that it is pointless to employ hundreds of thousands of the out-of-work in job-creation measures [as in Germany]. Instead, they could work on the development of modern types of public transport systems, care for rural landscapes and urban areas, add to the numbers of people in childcare, and improve public services by enabling swimming pools, libraries and sports grounds to stay open longer. But the savings in the cost of unemployment would probably hardly refinance all that. The question of how the enormous redistribution via taxes and levies, which would have to help pay for everything, will be possible under the conditions of a globalised economy remains mostly ignored.

Visions of a society beyond paid labour

If the further laying off of labour is to prove fateful, what would be the shape of a society that was past working for wages? After all, the narrowing of the definition of work to paid labour did not begin [in Germany] until industrialisation 200 years ago. It was not until then that all other kinds of work were dropped as indicators of national prosperity. For instance, 10 billion more hours per year were worked in German households than in industry. The volume of voluntary work is estimated to have equalled about one million fulltime jobs.

An increasing part of life is already spent outside paid labour. One hundred years ago, the Germans devoted 35 per cent of their lives to it. The figure is now 12-13 per cent, and the trend is downward.

The 'wonder weapons' that are to tackle individual crises about the purpose of work and the loss of social cohesiveness are labelled 'public welfare work', 'honorary

work', 'work for the community' or – as Beck calls it – 'civic work' and 'public work'. Useful things and services for the community, individual discovery of purpose and regaining of human dignity are to be produced in what Rifkin calls the 'Third sector', beyond the state and the market. Beck sees in the new 'public welfare workers' a new type of 'individualism based on solidarity'.

Economist Prof. Frithjof Bergmann advocates a strengthening of the private household and people's own work, which he terms "high-tech self-providing". He says people around the world should set up barter groups or 'local employment and trading systems' for the direct exchange of work and services. They could work with their own units of payment, that is, complementing the money economy with a time-calculation economy. In view of the growing importance of lifelong learning, bodies such as Switzerland's national Unesco commission call for learning to be recognised as educational work. American economist Milton Friedman proposes educational credit notes to finance it.

The German work scientist and futurologist Helmut Saiger, of Lünen, Westphalia, has attempted to summarise such thoughts. His vision of a society based on five types of work rests on the pillars of paid labour, own work, people-to-people work, community work and educational work. He says that given municipal money for community work, educational grants, a wider formation of wealth, credit notes for further training, real income from one's own work, and payment units for people-to-people work, this new 'work portfolio' can be compared with an 'income portfolio' that delivers greater independence from normal working for a living. An infrastructure for community work would have to be built up. There would be a need for municipal contact persons for civic cooperation, a differentiated range of offers of community work that met the needs of various citizens' groups, and a system of recognition and reward ranging from certificates to money in the form of a civic bonus. Finally, there should also be recognition of qualifications for activities outside paid labour.

The fact remains that part of this 'non-gainful employment income' must be provided by means of redistribution by the state. Saiger says that if citizens took over more tasks it would relieve the state of much of its load. More money could flow into civic work rather than into administration of supply and care. The rest, he adds, could be taken care of by work exchange processes in the form of people-to-people work,

which would create a second job market. "If every private household in Germany requested only four hours of services per week from other households, ranging from help with their children's homework to escorting seniors, this new job market would have a volume equal to more than four million fulltime jobs." A new distribution of labour and new, 'mixed service chains' formed by industry, the state and citizens would lead to new demand and new branches, and thus also to new regular jobs.

All alternative concepts have one thing in common. It should be about work beyond normal paid labour – about 'proper' work, but not procured via the regular job market. Beck wants to see civic work rewarded, not paid. He likes the idea of basic material security at the level of the social assistance rate, and a little non-material recognition to promote motivation. Most German economists are not too keen to pursue this model. The German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) comments that one must decide whether or not 'civic work' is work. If so, then it must be "compensated with normal wages". Otherwise, it would merely open a new cheap labour sector.

That certainly touches a sore spot. The idea of a 'third sector' is still diffuse. It can range from charitable services to self-help initiatives and public welfare work under state direction (job-creation programmes and work for people on social assistance), to barter groups, neighbourly help, and all forms of the 'grey' economy. Seen in that way, the development of the job market, employment policy and the withdrawal of the state from social and public services has to a considerable extent already created this third sector.

The DIW estimates that every third German adult does honorary work. Hundreds of thousands of people on social assistance do community work, and hundreds of thousands of the unemployed are in job-creation programmes and other labour exchange measures in which they work "in the public interest". Social protest movements have given rise to a niche and survival economy. Former house-squatters are now alternative urban planners, and initiatives of the out-of-work have developed into employment implementation organisations. The German Federal Labour Ministry estimates that several hundred thousand cleaning, caring and babysitting jobs are unregistered. Despite its size, however, the third sector has so far neither eliminated unemployment nor produced new social systems.

How should new systems come into being? The report of the Bavarian and Saxony state governments' Commission on the Future, which Beck substantially co-authored, claims that the state has withdrawn further from social and public services. Unemployed kindergarten staff, teachers and old people's nurses are doing honorary work without legal security in precisely the kindergartens, schools and old people's homes from which they were sacked. Or there are no municipally-run kindergartens, adventure playgrounds, or similar, at all – they are organised by the jobless parents themselves. Critics say 'civic work' means offloading public services to a deregulated zero-pay sector. They claim the state accepts that this means the living standards of a large section of the population inevitably decline.

The critics are also the only people that so far have posed the question of who can use the services created by civic work and who decides that. Informal mechanisms of exclusion arise quickly. The 'community egoism' of the affluent white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) suburbanites in big American cities is seen as an off-putting example. "Individualism based on solidarity" (Beck) is simply not synonymous with a total social responsibility that thinks beyond one's own suburb.

And who should do 'civic work'? Beck has in mind: "People who are temporarily out-of-work, young people before they begin vocational training, mothers after maternity leave, and older people in transition to retirement." He says more than three million jobs could be created by "public work". But such a 'job miracle' is hardly to be expected in the voluntary part of the public interest sector. As the DIW noted, honorary work is done almost exclusively in tandem with paid employment, during time off. At most, academics bridge the downtime of their unemployed phases with such work. The average jobless mother or drawer of social assistance are not to be found in this sector.

How voluntary should civic work be?

The jobless and people on social assistance are in fact now doing low-paid and non-paid civic work in a huge number of government make-work schemes, which pay barely more than social assistance rates. There is no question here of the voluntary work that Beck and Rifkin emphasise. In practice, community service quickly becomes the condition for payment of state benefits. Against that background, it is

hardly astounding that 'public welfare' work as a general obligation to work, such as in the USA, is becoming the central point of 'social assistance reforms'.

Some supporters of civic work do not anyway take such a narrow view of that. In the 'three-class model' developed by former manager Orio Giarini and economic adviser Patrick Liedtke for the Club of Rome, the jobless and people on social assistance are given jobs in the social sector totalling 20 hours per week. They are obliged to work to be entitled to claim a minimum income. Sociologist Sibylle Tönnies, of Bremen, also propagates quite openly a new version of a National Labour Service. Writing in Die Zeit, she said this instrument should not be discredited for ever because of its association with the Nazis.

Limits of feasibility

One does not have to share such negative assessments of the potential of 'civic work' to be sceptical about it. It is indeed not a mistake to assume in the political design of the model of the responsible citizen, and given appropriate infrastructural preconditions, that there also people who act out of public spirit. Limits of feasibility lie more in the economic basis of current state action. Without sustainable government investment, a 'third sector' in the sense of Rifkin, Beck or Saiger will hardly get off the ground. In Germany, the preconditions for it must be created by a fundamental restructuring of the entire tax and social security system.

But globalisation and the competition linked with it have taken the instruments out of the hands of the national state. The government is no longer free to design its revenues because every redistribution has an impact on the attractiveness of Germany as an industrial location and thus on employment. In international terms, the signs point more in the direction of deregulation and reducing state involvement. No-one so far has answered convincingly the really gripping question of how in this environment the state could regain its freedom of action for bold experiments.

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Recommended Internet links

www.arbeit-buerger-zukunft.de
Independent forum for new ideas, links, addresses and research reports

www.zukunftsinstitut.de
Homepage of trend researcher Matthias Horx

www.heise.de
Debates and interviews on the future: telework, opportunities/risks society, job-sharing (site intended mainly for journalists).

www.ehrenamt.de
Trends and questions on the future role of voluntary work.

www.staat-modern.de
Federal German government forum on the topics of the modern state, administrative reform, and restructuring of the welfare state.